DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 759 CS 215 075

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TITLE Zhuang Zi's Rhetorical Thoughts.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Chinese Culture; Comparative Analysis; Discourse Analysis; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Rhetorical Theory; *Taoism
IDENTIFIERS China; Comparative Rhetoric; Contrastive Rhetoric; Rhetorical Strategies; *Student Movement; Tiananmen Square Uprising; *Zhuang Zi

ABSTRACT

The memory of the student uprising at Tiananmen Square in 1989 invites one professor to examine more closely what she does: rhetoric and composition, especially rhetorical invention. To examine the kind of power exercised by official Chinese public discourse and whether language could help to avoid reoccurrences such as the loss of innocent people's lives, the Taoist thought of Zhuang Zi might help. And such an examination could also benefit comparative/contrastive rhetoric studies. Many recent studies of Zhuang Zi deal with his ideas about language use and rhetoric. Zhuang Zi illustrates repeatedly in his works that things are not as different as they seem no matter how they appear to the eye; in fact, they are one in the Tao. At Tiananmen Square the students' discursive practice bore similarities to the official government one: their language decided for the audience what to think, and these rhetors seemed to be experienced with how to manipulate the audience, just as the government was. The Tao is not the absolute truth but a path to truth. For Zhaung Zi, the word is "spontaneity." This means that a person can stop doing what others think is right and can make decisions guided by the Tao. If rhetoric is to teach, it will have to include the heuristic and catalytic power of language and discourse. Comparing and contrasting rhetorics in China and in the West is challenging and more studies by rhetoricians, philosophers, and linguists are needed. (Contains 39 references.) (NKA)

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Zhuang Zi's Rhetorical Thoughts

Haixia Wang

**I wish to thank Ray Schoen and Janice Lauer for help with this essay.

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Each year, the memory of the tragedy at Tianamen Square in 1989 is rekindled, especially around its anniversary. Such a memory makes me examine more closely what I do: rhetoric and composition, especially rhetorical invention. If indeed language is power, what kind of power was exercised by the official Chinese public discourse? How powerful was it? Was it responsible for the loss of those innocent people's lives in Beijing? And, how could language help to avoid re-occurrences of such horror? These are important questions not only for the Chinese democratic movement and China studies in general but also for comparative / contrastive rhetoric. To address these questions, in this essay I will discuss Taoist Zhuang Zi's thought, focusing on a chapter, "The Sorting which Evens Things Out," which deals with Zhuang Zi's basic concepts of language, concepts that have radically democratic, therefore rhetorical, implications. His thought, marginalized in China, has the potential for inventing Chinese rhetorical culture today.

(I) Does Zhuang Zi Make Sense?

Through the early decades of study of Zhuang Zi, this Chinese thinker was interpreted as a relativist, an irrational person, an anti-rhetorical philosopher, as well as a rhetorician. Fortunately, with many recent studies on Zhuang Zi, some of these contradictory interpretations are being viewed as superficial and even obsolete. One of the most encouraging areas of the study of Zhuang Zi that has made some significant progress is the study of Zhuang Zi's idea of language use and of rhetoric. In 1962, Robert Oliver had made the case that *Zhuang Zi* had important rhetorical implications, and in 1989 W. A. Callahan presented the study on how Zhuang Zi's concept of spontaneity [ziran], etymologically, meant <u>discourse</u> and how spontaneity had its democratic political implications. Yet, Zhuang Zi can continue to pose interpretive problems if the readers are not careful. For example, in the following passage, Zhuang Zi quotes the Chinese sophists:

> "None under heaven is more huge than the tip of autumn feather," and "The huge mountain is called small;"
> "None is more long-lived than the child died-young," and "Our Forefather Peng is called he who has died too young"

> "Heaven, earth, with I myself are born at the same time," and "myriads of things with I myself make one."
>
> (trans Wu 161-63)

An initial or isolated reading of these words could lead to the conclusion that for Zhuang Zi one thing is just as good as another or that these words are unreasonable even irrational. Yet, if Zhuang Zi is read in context, as mathematical logician Raymond M. Smullyan says in his *The Tao Is Silent*, then the initial reading seems to be superficial and to have missed the point. Reading Zhuang Zi rhetorically and in his context, Smullyan concludes that there is a difference between obeying the Tao and being in harmony with the Tao to Zhuang Zi (37). Obeying the Tao, one laboriously, if not fearfully, makes efforts to obey rigid distinctions made by others as if the differences were permanent and ultimate; being in harmony with the Tao, one spontaneously responds to life moment by moment and therefore differences become fluid and provisional. In his numerous articles and books on classical Chinese thoughts, sinologist A. C. Graham explains that there is a difference between irrationalism and anti-rationalism--and Zhuang Zi is not irrational but anti-rational, which does not prevent him from using analytical reasoning as his tool. Irrationalism is unreasonableness, and anti-rationalism is reasonable protest against a relentless fixation on rationality in spite of the objective world, common sense, common beliefs, and in spite of oneself. Zhuang Zi illustrates repeatedly in his works that things are not as different as they seem no matter how they appear to the eye; in fact, they are one in the Tao. Graham makes the point in his *Disputers of the Tao* that "Chuang-tzu never does say that everything is one, always puts the thought subjectively, as the sage treating as one" (181). Guangming Wu agrees with Graham on this observation in his own book on *Zhuang Zi: The Butterfly as Companion*. In other words, it is the illusion of differences that Zhuang Zi warns people to be aware of--not differences themselves. The well-known story "Morning Three" illustrates this point.

> What is called "morning, three?" Mr. Monkey-keeper, giving-out chestnuts, said, "Morning, three and evening, four, all right?" The multitudes of monkeys were all angry. He said, "If so, then

morning, four and evening, three." The multitudes of monkeys were all pleased.

(trans Wu 142).

Obviously, to Zhuang Zi, to waste one's time laboring over making things the same, not understanding that they are already the same, is "morning, three." The story warns against absolute differences, not differences in general.

Zhuang Zi's philosophy of difference and unity has social, political, and rhetorical implications in actual events such as that on the stage of Tianamen Square in 1989, and it sheds light on important lessons for us to learn, lessons that are anything but irrationalism or moral relativism. On the surface, the antagonism between the two forces at Tianamen Square was impossible to miss; but how different indeed were they?

On one side, the Party's rhetorical practice was represented in its newspaper, *People's Daily*. Between the 4th and the 9th of June the paper was silent about the event, forcing the readers of the newspaper to wait for a decision to be handed down to them. On June 10th the Party leader's speech was printed. The speech contained the following messages: 1. condolences for the lost soldiers' lives; 2. explanations that the event actually took place at a good time (the veteran-war-generals were able to command the military forces); 3. official labeling of the event as counter-revolutionary; 4. an excuse for the delayed action of the military (the number of people involved, domestic and abroad, was unprecedented); 5. praise for the military; 6. proclamation of the importance of political education in the future; and 7. praise for the noble nature of quelling the reactionaries as opposed to the base act of killing the people and the students committed by the United States government. Research shows that from June 10th, the day this speech appeared in the *People's Daily*, until August 31, every entry in the paper's editorial and political discussion sections was a discussion of one or two of these seven themes. Therefore, the meaning of this event was constructed by a benevolent sage. The ordinary people were expected first to wait, then to listen, and finally to study this meaning to reach the sage's level of thought. One important

characteristic of this instructional discourse was the repeated finality of these decisions. For example:

> Are the Four Cardinal Principles [the firm adherence to Marxism / Mao's thoughts, socialism, leadership of communist party of China, and proletarian dictatorship] and open reform policy wrong? We have not been wrong. There is nothing wrong with our Four Cardinal Principles. If there is anything amiss, it is that these principles have not been thoroughly implemented.
>
> (trans Oksenberg 379)

Compounded by this unyielding determination was the fact that the Party, by definition, always had had the last word as well as the first one. So ordinary people waited, listened, and studied--they were told exactly what and how to think about the event.

This official discourse deployed a powerful audience strategy. The message explains that the reason the government did not act right away was that the resistance was unprecedented. The leader maintained that the goal of the students was to "topple our country . . . and to establish the Western dependent bourgeois republic" (trans Oksenberg 378-79). Further, the leader mentioned the contradiction between the U.S. government's attitude toward Tianamen in 1989 and its act in Kent State University in the 1970's. Obviously, this was a message with the intention of embarrassing the US government, but also this had a powerful appeal to the Chinese audience. It encouraged the Chinese to agree with the government by discouraging them from agreeing with the democratic movement and especially its suspicious foreign connections. The century-old wariness of the West was invoked; besides, since the West was still very much an unknown to most Chinese, the Chinese audience became naturally cautious about things Western and foreign.

On the other side, the students' discursive practice bore important similarities to this official one: their language decided for the audience what to think, and these rhetors seemed to be experienced with how to manipulate the audience. In their Declaration of Hunger Strike, the students prided themselves in their "purest feelings of patriotism:" "We endure hunger, [and] we pursue truth. . . .Democracy is the highest aspiration of human existence; freedom is the innate right

of all human beings. But they require that we exchange our young lives for them" (tran Han 201). The patriotic ethos resembled that in the government's speech, but there were two other more important assumptions shared by the two parties in dispute: an undemocratic conception of the role of the elite in China and an arhetorical perception of the role of the populace in China's social-political life. The students were also part of the elite. The imperial examinations for students in China continued one of the world's oldest and most complete systems of meritocracy--it trained and selected civil officials for the imperial court through contests of formulated and formulaic writings. This process of creating a special class has a long history. In his *Chinese Democracy*, political scientist Andrew Nathan, when telling the story of a well-known fourth-century poet, Qu Yuan, comments on the intellectual class's allegiance to the central power structure--an allegiance that is so quintessential that many Chinese take it for granted. His words could describe the students' discourse.

> Tradition of remonstrance in China is ancient . . . .Tradition insists that the remonstrators were always unselfish. They never spoke to protect their personal rights; on the contrary, they put life and property at risk to awaken the ruler to his own interests and those of the state. When remonstrance failed, the act of self-sacrifice affirmed the moral character of the state and set an example for later generations of the minister's duty to guide the sovereign. "He who restrains his prince," wrote Mencius, "loves his prince."
>
> (24-25)

Nathan maintains that traditionally Chinese literati were indeed regarded and treated as part of the power structure, not part of the ordinary people, and that even though democracy was an unprecedented social system in China, the students did not seem aware that such a social change would be incompatible with their traditional relation to the government. Several China specialists agree with Nathan that the traditional Chinese intellectuals' loyalty to the prince was clearly everywhere at Tiananmen. For instance, Elizabeth Perry observes that

the students staged public negotiations, even though they were ignored like little children:

> Three student representatives kneeling on the steps of the Great Hall of the People, the one in the middle holding a scroll of white paper high above his head, hoping in this way to move the "servants of the people" into emerging from the great Hall to talk with the students. One minute after another passed. The student representatives became tired--so tired that they sagged down to the ground. Yet they continued to hold the petition above their heads. Approximately fifteen minutes passed; still they were ignored.
>
> (Perry 63)

The students also insisted that the Chinese working class be kept out of this political and historical event, or at best remain on the margins. They used student IDs as passes to the square; they turned down the workers' repeated offer to go on strike in support of the movement. According to another China specialist, moral philosopher Henry Rosemont, most of the students were gone by the time the tanks rumbled into the square. Rosemont also points out in his book, *A Chinese Mirror*, that no student executions were reported by 1991, the year this book was published, although at least 42 workers' executions had been reported (22). If indeed, ordinary citizens were used as scapegoats by the government, did the students treat them differently? The students' statue of Goddess of Democracy, their Declaration of Hunger Strike, were indeed heroic acts, but at the same time they were both so foreign to ordinary Chinese and so resonant of the Statue of Liberty and the Declaration of Independence that it is obvious that the students took their audience as both the Chinese and the American governments, making ordinary Chinese an irrelevant and therefore dispensable audience. Except for their more naive concept of the audience, therefore, the students were as undemocratic as the government in their discursive practice and were as determined as the government to keep ordinary people out of their own social and political decision making processes. Therefore, Zhuang Zi's notions that many times

differences are illusions and that there is unity within diversity can help us interpret the Tianamen experience.

(II) The Tao, Spontaneity, Myriads of Things, and Rhetoric

Zhuang Zi's strong emphasis on the harmful consequences of viewing illusionary and temporary differences as permanent is actually derived from his emphasis on the unity of the cosmic whole, which is common in the Chinese history of thought. This whole is the Way or the Tao. Modern Chinese specialists differ in their interpretations of the Tao; yet some of them agree that the Tao is more like the Western notion of probable truths than of absolute truth (Hansen, Ames, Hall, Graham, Rosemont, for example). In fact, as many have pointed out, including Chad Hansen, Chinese culture in general has the tendency to focus on a divisible whole, unlike some Western traditions, notably that of Plato, that start with the individual and then move on to aggregates of individuals. Hansen points out:

> The mind is not regarded as an internal picturing mechanism which represents the individual objects in the world, but as a faculty that discriminates the boundaries of the substances or stuffs referred to by names. This "cutting up things" view contrasts strongly with the traditional Platonic philosophical picture of objects which are understood as individuals or particulars which instantiate or "have" properties (universals).
>
> (30)

As Hansen says, the Tao is not the absolute truth, an interesting and important difference between Western and Chinese thinking. This subtle difference between cultures helps us to understand, in comparative and contrastive rhetoric, that even though classical Chinese thinkers did not speak of democracy, nor rhetoric, this is not to say that the Chinese never had anything democratic or rhetorical. In rhetorical terms, this point can be explained through the nature of contingent truths and the importance of kairotic moments. The first is characteristic of Chinese in general, and the second, of Zhuang Zi in particular.

The Tao is not the ultimate truth but the Way or a path, which is more like the probable truths. The Chinese emphasis on the divisible whole leads to their propensity for something that is similar to Division or whole/part thinking in the Western rhetorical and topical tradition. At Tianamen Square, this means that Chinese thinking would have been more keenly sensitive to the fact that what is true of the Tao of democracy, as a divisible Whole, is not necessarily true of all its parts; that what worked successfully for American democracy 200 years ago may not work as effectively for Chinese democracy today. The Tao of democracy is not absolute; it varies from one case to another, contingent upon the situation, including indigenous practices and beliefs.

Based on this principle, many classical Chinese philosophical schools could have, in principle at least, guided the democratic movement because the emphasis on part/whole relations is a Chinese characteristic. Drawing upon this principle, however, Zhuang Zi distinguishes himself from those other Chinese thinkers who also emphasize the Tao, the Way, or the Whole by emphasizing the importance of spontaneously responding to myriads of things, wanwu, in life. How do we deal with it all? Zhuang Zi has only one word: spontaneity, ziran. Emphasizing these two important concepts wanwu and ziran, Zhuang Zi's understanding of the Tao allows much more individual choice than do other Chinese thinkers' interpretations.

It is important to realize that another term wuwei, or doing nothing, a closely related concept to ziran, is not about being idle just as ziran does not imply that to achieve the Tao is easy. Instead, it involves much concentration: wuwei or ziran is about not blowing an empty wind of words to confuse people but giving up our desire for control based on our immediate vision of things in exchange for a control guided by a spontaneity that is enabled by a clear vision of myriad things. Then, Zhuang Zi believes, we can stop doing what others think is right for us and can make decisions and accomplish things on our own guided by the Tao. This concept of spontaneity is similar to the rhetorical concept of Kairos. Examples of carpenters, sick, disabled people and animals permeate Zhuang Zi's works, and Chapter II

starts with "Zi Qi of South Wall." Because the South Wall was where common people lived, Zi Qi must be one of the commoners. And the reason for this lies in Zhuang Zi's belief that carpenters or any other common people can be sages; in fact, no one else can make fixed rules for carpenters to get the Tao of carpentry, which must be obtained by the carpenters themselves in given circumstances. To be sages, we all must learn how to make choices and decisions. When we get the knack of it, we no longer obey rules but follow our spontaneity, which is harmonious with the Tao. Zhuang Zi, not unlike the Western Older Sophists in this respect, believes that the Tao or the Way of things is forming itself constantly in all given situations and therefore is everywhere in the things themselves--just like in the concept of kairos.

Even though Kairos is as difficult to be translated into Chinese as it is into English, and even though the English word spontaneity cannot totally capture the phrase ziran the way Zhuang Zi uses it, I find Zhuang Zi's concept of ziran very rhetorical. As he says in Chapter II: "great sages such as are met but once in ten-thousand generations are met daily by those who know how to interpret this" (trans Cleary 79; emphases added). Anyone who has achieved spontaneity will have clear visions of things despite the constantly changing world. "The Holy Man embraces them all without discrimination" (trans Wu 146), says Zhuang Zi, and the all includes myriads of things. Thus at Tianamen Square, the students' appeal to the government and the United States in 1989 was both necessary and effective because the United States did respond to that appeal. Yet, not to consider the ordinary people as legitimate decision-makers in their own social-cultural system was to violate the Tao of the given situation and therefore was a grievous as well as costly mistake, unfortunately, more for the ordinary Chinese than for the students. Spontaneity and contact with the visions of the once-in-ten-thousand-generations-sage would have meant valuing the input by fellow Chinese, even if these Chinese were not college-educated. Only then would myriads of things--Confucian moralism, the Declaration of Independence, the Statue of liberty--not be as different as they were made to seem in 1989.

In the light of all this, it is indeed very ironic that Zhuang Zi has been interpreted as anti-rhetorical because, the argument goes, he does not allow the use of words. What Zhuang Zi is actually against, as shown above, is the rhetorical and formulaic use of language. However, not only is this, once again, a superficial reading of his texts, but also it is a simplification of rhetoric, merely construing the rhetor as the conduit, not the constructor, of the rhetorical process as if language and thinking were totally separated. In Chapter II of *Zhuang Zi*, he says that while Confucians draw permanent boundaries around things, labeling them as left, right, social classes, right manners and while Mohists like distinctions, disputations, contentions, and divisions,

> the Way has never had borders, saying has never had norms. It is by a "this" which deems that a boundary is marked. Let me say something about the marking of boundaries. You can locate as there and enclose by a line, sort out and assess, divide up and argue over alternatives, compete over and fight over; these I call our Eight Potencies. What is outside the cosmos the sage locates as there but does not sort out. What is within the cosmos the sage sorts out and does not assess. The records of the former kings in the successive reigns in the Annals the sage assesses, but does not argue over. (trans Graham 57).

Clearly, Zhuang Zi acknowledges that when things form, they indeed have boundaries; but these boundaries are not to be taken as permanent. Therefore, in addition to Zhuang Zi's warning against the tendency to view temporary boundaries as permanent, his system also includes locating, sorting, and assessing so that everyone can learn to become a sage. As Graham points out: "Although Zhuang Zi rejects <u>bien</u>, argumentative disputation over posed alternatives, he always uses in a favorable sense <u>lun</u> sorting, grading, coherent thought and discourse which arranges things in their proper relations" (*Disputers* 189). A person can be trained to know how to choose, how to make decisions, by cultivating spontaneity but a person cannot be told exactly what to choose because, again, the truth of each situation is constantly shaping itself.

It is not whether Zhuang Zi rationalizes or uses language, but when, where, and how he does either that is the key to his understanding of the Tao. And, it is not that Zhuang Zi sees no right or wrong; rather, he sees more clearly than many others the harm of the over simplification of binaries: use/not-use language, this-is/that-is-not, or shi / fei in Chinese. Finally, fluid boundaries are also very similar to probabilities and provisional knowledge that rhetoric deals with. In *Zhuang Zi*, however, it is clear that we deal with probabilities not because we choose to, leaving certainties for some others to deal with; we deal with probabilities because that is the Way / the Tao of the world. Given all this, Zhuang Zi's rhetorical implications, even those in his warning against the inherent pitfalls in language using, are beyond question.

(III) Conclusion

The way in which Chinese classical thinkers like Zhuang Zi sort out temporary boundaries and deal with probabilities, which I have started to explore in this essay, deserves further inquiry. For example, how similar and different is Zhuang Zi's teaching of the knack / Tao for carpenters, the sick, the ordinary, as well as the learned when compared to and contrasted with the Western conception of rhetorical art, art in the sense of techne? And, how does Zhuang Zi's advice on how people should, with great effort and concentration, pause to absorb the myriads of things in each situation in order to be spontaneous and be aware of the Tao, relate to, comment on, compare to, or contrast with different kinds of Western rhetorical traditions?

Thomas Farrell says in his *Norms of Rhetorical Culture* that to invent a rhetorical culture, or in order "for a culture to be rhetorical, we must freely acknowledge the responsibility of civic discourse to unite the appearances of cultural affiliation with the plans and projects of public life" (278). In this essay, I have tried to demonstrate the possible and rich potential of Chinese rhetorical

studies for inventing such a culture, either in the U.S. or in China. If rhetoric, for which the Chinese language still does not have a word, has taught us anything, it will have to include the heuristic and catalytic power of language and of discourse. In addition, knowledge of the other, the Western rhetorics, to Chinese and the Chinese discursive practices to Americans also provides us with the vantage point of recognizing linguistic barriers to our thinking in our own language(s). Speaking from his own experience, Graham says that these barriers, from this stand point from the outside, become "more clearly visible" than just from within (*Disputers* 428). My experience is compatible with that of Graham's. I find comparing and contrasting rhetorics in China and in the West challenging and fulfilling and am looking forward to seeing more studies by rhetoricians as well as philosophers, linguists, political scientists and many others.

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